

Good, Bad, Indifferent or Furphy: the political influence of Christianity in a country of many faiths

Rev. Elenie Poulos

National Director, UnitingJustice Australia

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□ In an interview with Geraldine Doogue on *Compass* in October 2004 John Howard said that he regards 'the Judeo-Christian tradition as the single greatest influence for good in the Australian Community' and that he has a 'very strong belief in the... stabilising influence of the Judeo-Christian ethic in this country'. He has made similar statements on a number of occasions since.

2 □ Right at this beginning it's probably appropriate to remind ourselves of just what the constitutionally defined relationship between church and state is in Australia. Do we have a constitutional separation between church and state or something less than that? The offending section is paragraph 116. It prohibits the setting up of a national church, anything like the Church of England, and it prevents the government favouring one religion over others.

Over the last few years, the question of whether that Christian influence is currently at play in the political arena, and to what extent it influences public policy and the positions of individual politicians, has been the subject of much discussion, writing and heated debate. And there has been a movement by a number of non-denominational Christian groups to at least acknowledge what is referred to as 'Australia's Christian heritage' and to more forcefully claim Australia as a 'Christian nation'.

The prior question is of course, which and whose Christianity are we talking about? Are there particular individuals, churches, denominations or faith-based organisations that have a deep impact on our political life and if so, what is that impact? Are there other churches or groups who struggle to build any meaningful influence? If so, what makes the difference? What does this mean for the influence of religious groups that are other than Christian?

What's often called 'mainstream' church activity has a huge impact on public policy. It is difficult to imagine that the government would have divested itself of the delivery of so many welfare and community services if church-based organisations, especially the he ones associated with the Uniting, Catholic and Anglican churches, weren't willing and able to pick them up. But this is not the issue that has been central to the recent debate although I think it is a pertinent one. Neither is the issue often considered in terms of Christian leaders and churches having a strong voice in the public forum in relation to policies that concern people who are poor, vulnerable and oppressed.

So while Government may not be happy with Church leaders speaking out against the detention of asylum seekers or the erosion of workers rights, and often replies to such criticism with labels such as 'meddlesome priests' or 'the uniformed', this is not where the heat of the debate lies either.

For many commentators, politicians and Christian and non-Christian activists, advocates and lobbyists, the issue at the heart of the matter is about Christian influence on policy around bioethics and sexuality, for example stem cell research, abortion, euthanasia and same sex unions and marriage. In the public discourse, it is most often particular positions taken on these issues which are most commonly referred to by that code phrase 'Christian values'. The best demonstration of this that I have seen recently comes out the Christian Democrat Party in New South Wales. In the lead up to the last state election they issued this checklist of Australian Christian values. There are a couple of values related to concern for the environment but they do sit rather oddly in the list.

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I was expecting a small workshop group which would have given us more opportunity to have a real conversation but the fabulous response to this conference has pushed me to take a different approach and so I think it's important for me to outline a little about my interest in these questions and the kinds of experiences I bring to bear on this discussion.

As you've already heard, I am a Minister in the Uniting Church in Australia, currently the National Director of UnitingJustice. UnitingJustice is an agency of the Assembly, the national council of the Uniting Church. It's responsible for resourcing the Church to develop positions on matters of social and ecological justice and peace, and then communicating those positions both into the Church itself and into the public space, including the political forum. Part of this work includes advocacy and direct lobbying of politicians, both in our own right (with our Uniting Church partners) and in co-operation with ecumenical organisations and other civil society organisations whose values and aims are consistent with ours. We co-ordinate the development of national policy and position statements for the Uniting Church, prepare submissions to Federal government and parliamentary inquiries and consultations, work in the media and produce educational and advocacy resources for Church members. I have been in this position for just over 5½ years.

UnitingJustice has spoken out against Australia's participation in the Iraq war. We have been advocating on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees for changes to our immigration policy. We have voiced our concern about Australia's unwillingness to sign the Optional Protocols on the Convention Against Torture and to ratify the Kyoto Protocols. We have stood up for the rights of gay and lesbian people in the Church and in society. We have made submissions to parliamentary inquiries and consultations on issues such as poverty, immigration, the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement, industrial relations, citizenship and anti-terrorism legislation. We support the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in their advocacy for justice for Indigenous Australians.

What I offer here today is a personal reflection on the political influence of Christianity in Australia from the perspectives that I have gained through this ministry. You should know that I have more questions than answers and am searching for a way through that might enable and facilitate the reinvigoration of the voices of so-called mainstream churches, especially the Uniting Church, and the progressive Christian voice, into the political arena. I'll start with a somewhat idiosyncratic and chronologically random look at some of the things that have been happening at a federal level, which is the one I know best. At state level there are also some very interesting stories to tell.

The last few weeks, have in fact been very busy in terms of the engagement between Christians, churches and Federal politics.

Last Monday and Tuesday the National Council of Churches joined with the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Australian Council of Social Services and the Australian Council of Trade Unions to sponsor the second National Civil Society Dialogue. Invitations went out to Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist leaders and leaders from welfare, environmental and union groups as well as human rights experts and high-profile academics across a number of disciplines.

Invitations to address the gathering went out to the Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader and the leaders of the Greens and the Democrats.

The aim of this ongoing dialogue is to build the strength and voice of Australian civil society. Two years in a row it has gone unreported in the media. Two years in a row the Prime Minister has refused the invitation and has not sent anyone else to represent the Government. This year the Opposition Leader sent one of his Shadow Ministers and the Leader of the Greens sent one their Senators.

On the second day, we broke up our meeting to go to Parliament House to support the leaders of Indigenous Communities in the Northern Territory as they held a press conference to ask for the legislation related to their communities and their lands to be delayed so that they could be consulted. CEOs and Chairs from among the country's largest civil society organisations formed a guard of honour to welcome and support Indigenous leaders as they entered. Not one image of this was published and only a couple of reports made passing mention of this support from broader Australian society.

Not one media outlet picked up the joint press release we issued on this same issue. I would have thought that such odd bedfellows as ACOSS, the ACTU, Australian Conservation Foundation, the National Federation of Australian Women, the National Council of Churches, Friends of the Earth, the UCA, the National Association of Community Legal Centres and the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils would have peaked someone's interest but apparently not.

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Two days later what did peak the interest of the press was Kevin Rudd and John Howard addressing, via an Australian Christian Lobby webcast, about 600 churches

around the country mostly Pentecostal and Baptists with a only a few Uniting Churches signing up and even fewer Catholic. Howard and Rudd both took the opportunity to announce policies designed to please this constituency: an internet filter for every Australian family and extra police and resources to fight internet pornography from John Howard and the promise of a family impact statement prepared for every submission to Cabinet from Kevin Rudd. So while the questions they fielded covered industrial relations, climate change and foreign aid, their policy announcements were clearly targeted at so-called 'family values' issues, continuing to skew the public perceptions of just exactly what ARE Christian values. This was reported in detail by every major Australian news outlet, radio, television and newspaper. While crikey.com wondered what all the fuss was about.

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Another recent Christian initiative supported by both Federal leaders is the National Day of Thanksgiving, held annually on what is in fact our national day of shame, National Sorry Day.

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The National Day of Thanksgiving is an initiative of the Australian Prayer Network and is supported by the Australian Christian Lobby. The website describes the vision for this day in this way:

The concept of a National Day of Thanksgiving was in the hearts of many Australians for a number of years. Many people wrote to the Australian Prayer Network expressing a desire to see our nation called to prayer one day each year to acknowledge our Christian heritage and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over our nation.

The Australian Prayer Network took such thoughts and dreams to other national prayer and ministry organizations and church leaders. They received overwhelming encouragement to pursue the concept. The decision to proceed with a National Day of Thanksgiving was confirmed at a meeting of National ministry leaders at Parliament House Canberra on the 17th June 2003. They voted unanimously to support the Australian Prayer Network in their initiative. It was decided to hold a National Day of Thanksgiving on the Saturday of Pentecost weekend each year and to seek to have the day included in our national calendar.¹

The Prime Minister and Opposition Leader Rudd both sent letters of support this year but I wonder how much they know about the Australian Prayer network, who are on about much more than just prayer. Let me read you this from their website:

We seek to have a prophetic voice on major issues affecting our nation by representing the voice of the Intercessors into the public arena. We do this through written articles and public statements. We also work closely with other national organisations and ministries to bring a united voice on issues of concern to the Christian constituency we represent, to the decision makers within our nation. We are committed to attend gatherings in Parliament House Canberra as a means of representing the views of our members to, and building relationships with, those serving in our Federal Parliament.²

¹ http://www.thanksgiving.org.au/aboutus_view.asp?intid=5

² http://ausprayernet.org.au/our_ministry.php

One of the activities they are promoting to support their prayer is the practice of spiritual mapping. The website has a series of instructional papers entitled, *Spiritual Mapping for Effective Spiritual Warfare*. Here's a snippet:

*As God's people we possess the Truth. We hold the real weapons to bring down strongholds. Are we working as diligently as the enemy's camp? Are we applying the Blood of Jesus as we go into grocery stores, parks, hospitals or our children's schools? Are we diligently DOING what Scripture has taught us for the betterment of ourselves and all men?*³

What they *are* doing when they map is to mark sites where Satan has a stronghold, for example, places of worship for Mormons, Baha'i, Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witness; places that sell new age goods, or support the occult and sell 'spiritual garbage' including comic book stores and supermarkets, places owned or operated by homosexuals, abortion clinics or family planning services:

*You are locating and infiltrating the enemy's camp for the purpose of ultimately breaking up his works.*⁴

It may be that the staff of the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader were unaware of the activities of the Australian Prayer Network. It may be that they are. I am not sure which is more concerning. In any case, the National Day of Thanksgiving vision is quite clear about what its organisers regard as "the Lordship of Jesus Christ over our nation" and so it would seem to me that if our political leaders are at all trying to build good relationships with the significant percentage of Australians who are not Christian, such endorsements may well be to their eventual disadvantage.

Let me go back a few years now.

9 In August 2004 John Howard, the then Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson and Nicola Roxon, then Shadow Attorney General, all addressed the National Marriage Forum which was well attended by a number of other Federal and state politicians. 10 It was an event organised by the National Marriage Coalition which was founded in July that year by the Australian Christian Lobby, the Australian Family Association, and the Fatherhood Foundation. A minor point of interest: the former Opposition Leader, Kim Beazley, is listed as a patron of the Australian Family Association. According to Meaghan Shaw of *the Age*, the National Marriage Coalition is also supported by Catch the Fire Ministries.

10 And just a little digression here about Catch the Fire Ministries: were involved a few years ago in a religious vilification case against Muslim Australians. They were convicted and then had the conviction overturned on appeal. Earlier this year Danny

³ Diane Buker, US Spiritual Warfare Network Regional Coordinator, *Applying the Blood of Christ on Behalf of Our Cities*, http://ausprayernet.org.au/teaching/sm_articles1_8.php

⁴ *ibid.*

Nalliah travelled to the US to use his experiences help in the fight against proposed hate Crimes Legislation.

And just earlier this month, according to a report from crikey.com on Tuesday, he had meetings with the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader where he prayed with both and received a word from God about who will win the next election.

11 Back to the National Marriage Forum, where the Shadow Attorney General announced that the Labor Party would support the legislation which enshrines the definition of marriage as exclusively a union between a man and a woman in such a way that it could not be interpreted otherwise by the law.

The results of the Senate Inquiry into that legislation had not yet been released and the Federal Labor Party Caucus had agreed to wait for this report before making its decision. Roxon was obviously swayed by the sheer weight of numbers of submissions from fundamentalist Christian groups and individuals. One report mentions as many as 12,000 such submissions⁵.

12 And so on Friday 13 August just a few days later, the Senate passed into law the Marriage Amendment Bill 2004. The Australian Family Association were happy - announcing on their website "Marriage we won!"⁶

These events and interactions between what is variously referred to as 'the Christian right', 'fundamentalist Christian groups', and 'conservative Christian groups' but more frequently just as 'Christian', seem to get an awful lot of press while mainstream churches struggle to have their voice heard as they advocate for peace and justice and the needs of those who are poor, oppressed and marginalised.

One year before the National Marriage Forum, however, in the lead up to and the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, the largest Australian churches did receive some considerable media space - maybe it was because we all agreed on something and that in itself is newsworthy. By August 2003 the Government, and Alexander Downer in particular, was obviously fed up with being on the receiving end of some pretty harsh and well-publicised criticism. In a public lecture he told Church leaders to stop spreading our amateurish ignorance and 'one-sided moral message' about the invasion of Iraq and go back to doing what we're supposed to, by which he meant tending to and praying with our little flocks in our decaying buildings at 9:30 on Sunday mornings and visiting them when they get sick.

As far as I know no party leader or frontbenchers from either of the two major parties have publicly condemned any statements or positions taken by any of the smaller Christian groups I have already mentioned. There was no criticism, for example, of those Christian leaders who had a great deal of attention for spreading another 'one-sided moral message.' Maybe that time, about abortion and the pill RU486, the message suited.

⁵ *Not Happy, Nicola*, by Polly Bush, August 10, 2004, SMH Webdiary, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/10/1092102440370.html>

⁶ <http://www.family.org.au/>

During the last Federal Election campaign George Pell and Peter Jensen had significant media coverage when they decided to criticise Labor's school funding policy. But who heard about the Uniting Church calling for a commitment from both parties to cancel the debt of the world's poorest countries or commit to a treaty process with Indigenous Australians?

And after the election, Kevin Andrews one of the most high profile conservative Christians in the Howard Government, having gone to some trouble to assure us all that the Government's proposed industrial relations changes were consistent with Christian teaching, then was forced to express concern about the uniformed opinions of church leaders who expressed their concern that it was not consistent with Christian values. I do wonder why he felt a need to make that claim?

Gerard Henderson, the Director of the Sydney Institute and Sydney Morning Herald columnist, wrote a piece in October 2004 entitled 'Mock Christians at your peril, lefties.'⁷ Maybe he really does believe that there are no left-leaning Christians as the title implied, but if not, then he certainly wasn't talking about Christians like me. He was referring to those who stand for 'family values', or 'moral values', the real churches, the ones that are 'traditional' and of course 'evangelical'. His warning, in light of the recent attempts to reignite abortion as a so-called unresolved issue, may be prophetic indeed and looking at the extraordinary roll-call of politicians who have turned up to the kinds of events I have talked about, it seems that many have taken his advice seriously.

A particular stream of contemporary Christianity, held by a very small minority of Australians, appears to be making some significant inroads in our country's political life but we should not forget that while they may have won on marriage they did not get their way on RU486 and stem cell research. Private conversations with the Prime Minister and Opposition Leaders do not necessarily translate into public policy. We also need to remember that this Christian constituency is small: there are, for example, more than twice as many Eastern Orthodox adherents in Australia as there are Pentecostal church members and almost twice as many Buddhists. Here are the census figures.

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I believe that the current engagement between political leaders and Christian leaders who represent a broader set of Christian values around hospitality to the stranger, peace among enemies and human rights for all people, is less than encouraging and I'm not sure I understand the attention that seems to be being lavished on such a small voter set.

7 <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/10/18/1097951626689.html?from=storylhs>

There's no doubt that these groups are noisy, well-funded and increasingly well connected, but it's not their votes that win or lose elections. I also don't think it's a full-on US-style political assault by the religious right although there is no doubt that Australian groups have learned from their US counterparts. But there is something that concerns me deeply about the effects on Australia's social fabric should these groups continue to gain influence in the political sphere. This is moving very quickly and we have to do something about it now. Our time is running out. One of the most potent reasons for why it is important it is for us to get in there and advocate from a different Christian perspective is the recent campaign by NSW Parliamentarian, Fred Nile and the Christian Democratic Party.

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Australia needs to hear a different Christian voice in the public forum: one that believes that God calls us to participate in the work of reconciliation in the world; one that understands that the most radical and demanding command of Jesus was to love your enemy; one that understands that we are called to love without discrimination, wage peace and offer power to the least in our world.

It is time to hear the voice of Christianity that is true to the biblical vision and gospel, true to the person and being of Jesus Christ and true to the fullest experiences of our humanity speaking as a source of great hope in our society, reminding us that we are capable of something better and that if we work together, those of us of all faiths and no faith, we can build a world where nature is respected and all humanity flourishes in dignity and hope.

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